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ABSTRACT

Despite contemporary efforts to develop lists of department chair tasks and responsibilities, there is no historical foundation available for understanding the department chair position. This study was designed to identify the critical incidents and factors which impacted on the development of the department chair position in higher education from 1870 to 1925. Delphi survey questionnaires were mailed to 15 scholars specializing in the study of department or unit chairs; 13 were returned. The study found that: (1) respondents agreed most strongly that federal legislation in vocational education, which forced greater compartmentalization of responsibilities, worked to formalize the chair role; (2) the second most important factor impacting the chair role was the increased attention to fund raising and the emphasis on private endowments; (3) respondents indicated moderate to high levels of knowledge concerning the historical development of the chair position; and (4) overall, 29 factors, organized as 5 contextual themes, were identified as being related to the chair position: management and personnel, curricular issues, federal involvement, technological advances, and revenue and funding. A list of participants, their publications, and the 29 factors are appended. (Contains 13 references.) (MAB)

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Critical Incidents Impacting the Role and Development of the Academic Department Chair, 1870 to 1925

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Abstract

The department chair position is often the beginning point for academic administrator development. The chair position is unique in that this individual must serve both the faculty and senior administration, creating difficulty in responding wholly to either set of demands. Scholars and practitioners have defined roles, responsibilities, challenges, and coping strategies of these department chairs, yet there has been little historical description of how they have evolved. The current study uses a panel of experts on the department chair position and identifies nearly 30 key concepts central to the creation of department chairs in higher education.

In recent years, the role of the department chair or academic unit head has come under both greater professional and scholarly attention. Due in part to growing demands for greater accountability throughout all sectors of higher education, and due in part to the growing scores of specialized administrators (Kerr, 1991), the chair position has become a topic of a growing body of literature (Seagren & Miller, 1995). Additionally, Roach (1976) claimed that up to 80% of all of higher education institution's decisions are made at the departmental level.

The departmental chair position has been described as "caught in the middle" (Seagren & Miller, 1994) between faculty demands and administrative pressures. The ambiguity of reporting lines, then, demands that the chair report to two masters (Creswell, Wheeler, Seagren, Egly, & Beyer, 1990). The masters are both faculty, who the chair must serve as an advocate, and administrators, who see the chair position as a fulcrum to the implementation of college or institutional policy (Seagren, Creswell, & Wheeler, 1993; Creswell, Wheeler, Seagren, Egly, & Beyer, 1990). Indeed, the chair position has typically been identified as existing within a dilemma, where pressures are alternatively placed on the individual from opposite directions (Seagren, Creswell, & Wheeler, 1993); Seagren & Miller, 1994). Miller (1995) conversely argued that the chair position is situated within a web, where various constituencies, including upper level administrators, faculty, students, external advisory groups, etc., all have the potential to place a strain on the chair's performance.

Despite contemporary efforts to develop "grocery-lists" of chair tasks, duties, responsibilities, and challenges (Gmelch & Miskin, 1993; Seedorf & Gmelch, 1989), there is no historical foundation available for understanding the chair position.

Specifically, historical perspectives on higher education have dealt either peripherally with organizational development or have focused almost exclusively on timeliness and philosophies, rather than organizational growth.

The current study was designed to identify the critical incidents and factors, which impacted the development of the department chair position in higher education during the period of 1870 to 1925. The study will contribute to the knowledge base of the department chair, primarily shedding light on the rationale or reasoning for its evolution. With primary emphasis on the formative years of modern higher education, the study addresses the historical context of factors, which played a role in the definition of administrative and teaching duties and responsibilities of the chair position.

Rationale for the Study

The academic department chair plays a pivotal role in the organizational effectiveness of the college or universities (Seagren, Creswell, & Wheeler, 1993), particularly in relation to serving students (Miller & Seagren, 1995), budgeting (Miller, 1995), and providing professional development opportunities to faculty (Seedorf & Gmelch, 1989). The department chair must contend with implementing institutional policy, while simultaneously developing and implementing micro-policy as it relates tot he cluster or community of scholars who comprise the academic department. Peltason (1984) observed that he chair position is so important, that "an institution can run for a long time with an inept president, but not for long with inept chairpersons" (p. xi).

Although few would argue the importance of the chair position, those who advocate professional development for chairs and those who study the chair position

have developed very little of an historical foundation or base for the creation of the chair position. The chair position has been advocated without a framework or history of the position to draw upon. Questions of why and how remain unanswered in the study of the development of the chair position. Hawley (1981) argued that historical analyses provide the key elements to understanding and predicting future problems, crises and concerns. Therefore, only by developing a firm understanding of the history of the chair position, where it came from and why it exists, can higher education continue to place the heavy burden of institutional effectiveness and change on the position.

An additional benefit of the current research is the potential for finding a richer, more descriptive history of American higher education and to shed possible insight into the professional development needs of scholars and practitioners who study the chair position, and those who serve in chair roles. By developing an understanding of the history of the position, individuals in the chair position will be able to reflect on organizational changes and similarities in terms of challenges to develop their own set of response strategies. Practicing chairs may very well also find the current study serves as impetus to viewing the academic unit in a different, perhaps more holistic, fashion.

In reference to the particular time period of study, the Progressive Era has been strongly noted for its influence and innovation in the private sector as well as the public sector (Gould, 1986). Buy using this time period as a foundation for the chair position and the organizational birth of higher education, the contemporary graduate university will be better understood and can therefore serve as a more complete factor in understanding history and possibly the future (Hawley, 1981). In American history, the

period in question included the rise of urbanization, immigration, and industrialization, all of which profoundly impacted the development of American public education, including institutions of higher education. Higher education reconfigured to meet the needs of a changing society during the period of 1870 to 1925 as never before. The result is time period rich with change and the creation of a position, which has evolved to one of great importance to organizational behavior.

Research Methods

For the purpose of conducting the study, a purposive sample of scholars specializing in the study of the department or unit chair or head was utilized. An analysis of documents referenced by the Educational Resources Information Clearinghouse (ERIC) revealed 15 authors who had published at least three scholarly manuscripts dealing with the department or unit chair or head position (see Table 1). These 15 scholars were asked to nominate two or more other individuals who specialize in the study of the chair position, thus allowing for the non-referencing of journals or publications by ERIC. The first 15 individuals identified were selected for inclusion in the study.

The Delphi research technique, which was conducted in three rounds in 1997, was chosen as the most appropriate method for its ability to development consensus among a geographically dispersed panel of experts. A panel of 10 leading scholars who study and teach in higher education organizational behavior critically reviewed the Delphi survey. Following revisions to the instrument, it was mailed to the 15 individuals identified. In Round 1, they were asked to respond to the question: "Please list up to

five incidents, events, or factors which you believe influenced or impacted how the chair position became structured, grew, or took on power and responsibility between 1870 and 1925."

Results

Of the Round 1 Delphi survey questionnaires mailed to the 15 individuals identified through the nomination process. A total of 13 (86.7%) surveys were returned, noting that 1 individual declined participation in the study due to a personally perceived lack of knowledge about the history of the chair position, and 1 individual who had been nominated was noted to be deceased. Respondents identified a total of 36 (an average of 2.76 responses per individual) responses were developed, but after editing for duplication, a total of 29 items remained to be rated in subsequent Delphi rounds.

The Round 2 Delphi survey technique provided a listing of the 29 items identified in Round 1 to be rated by the 13 participants. The participants were asked to rate, on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, the extent to which they agreed (5) or disagreed (1) that the incidents played a major role in the growth and development of the chair position. All 13 participants responded within the identified time frame (100% response).

In Round 3 of the Delphi procedure, participants were again asked to rate their agreement level with the 29 items, taking into consideration reported group data, including mean, standard deviation, and range for each survey item. Respondents recorded a total of 78 changes from their Round 2 responses (on average 6 changes in ratings per respondent), indicating a total change of rating perception of 21% (78 of 377 total items rated). The changes were viewed as a validation of individual reflection

and consideration of group data, and reinforced the use of the Delphi survey method as an appropriate exploratory tool. All 13 participants responded within the identified time frame for Round 3 (100% response rate).

Respondents rated 17 of the 29 (59%) items at the agree or strongly agree level and the remaining 12 items were rated with a group mean between 3.0 and 4.0 (41% of the incidents or factors). As shown in Table 2, respondents agreed most strongly that federal legislation in vocational education which forced greater compartmentalization of responsibilities (mean 4.92, mode 5.00, SD .2774, range 1.00) worked to formalize the chairperson role. The legislation alluded to by respondents dealt primarily with national efforts to regulate worker education and work-force rights, such as the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 and the growing efforts surrounding the later George-Reed acts and the George-Barden acts (Miller & Mahler, 1991).

The second most strongly agreed to incident or factor was the increased attention to fund raising and the emphasis on private endowments (mean 4.77, mode 5.00, SD .4385, range 1.00). The literature base has not historically addressed the role of fund raising from a middle-level management perspective, although much has been identified related to the abilities of philanthropists to manipulate curriculum and organizational structure. This manipulation has primarily been noted at the board level and in matters related to institutional finances (Miller, 1993; Korvas, 1984).

Respondents were asked to rate their level of knowledge of the history of the chair position. Participants indicated primarily moderate to high levels of knowledge concerning the history, as 11 of the 13 respondents rated their personal knowledge as either moderate or high. Of the 29 incidents identified, one significant difference was

revealed through the use of a one-way Analysis of Variance procedure and a Tukey post hoc test of honestly significant differences. The difference identified was on the incident of federal movements to create a system of research and development rooted in higher education institutions. The difference was noted between those respondents who indicated a low level of knowledge of the history of the chair position and those who indicated a high level of knowledge of the chair position.

Specific historical themes were not identified, yet five contextual themes emerged from a content analysis of identified incidents and factors. Through the use of two external evaluators and the researcher, the following contextual themes were identified: management and personnel; curricular issues; federal involvement; technological advances; and revenue and funding.

Discussion

The current study was designed to explore how the department chair position organizationally came into being, and specifically, how the Progressive area reflected or helped the position evolve. Although no singular definitions or correlations were identified, a number of factors were brought to light as incidents which helped the chair position evolve into its current form.

First, the federal government and private sector business and industry have played a role in the definition and evolution of the chair position. The role attributable to both the federal government and the private sector appeared to be based in both financial control as well as management-related trends and issues. As such, issues present in business and industry can be linked to the compartmentalization of higher

education institutions, as evidenced by the identification of the work of Alfred Sloan in making advances in marketing and management at the General Motors Company in the 1920s. Additionally, trends identified which were directly linked to the federal government suggest a relationship of power, control, or dominance by the government in regulating, perhaps informally, the behaviors of public higher education institutions. In both instances, current trends seem to have indicated a continuation of both the influence of the private sector, including such issues as Total Quality Management and consumerism, and the federal government, including such issues as the Job Training Partnership Act and other Labor-Education linkages which direct federal monies.

Second, there are identifiable factors and incidents in the historical development of higher education, which impacted the formation, and growth of the department chair position. Respondents identified 29 individual factors, incidents, and trends, which they believed impacted how the chair position evolved to its current state, particularly within the period of study. The factors identified, while not a definitive list, provide a template for understanding some of the roles and actors, which influenced the development of American higher education between 1870 and 1925.

The primary factor identified by respondents was that of the federal government's role in creating legislation for occupational or vocational programming, which they expected higher education institutions to implement. Such a situation demands considerable attention on the part of policy makers and senior administrators who often deal with the development of legislative initiatives.

Third, data indicated that scholars who write on the subject of the department chair are knowledgeable in relation to the history of the chair position. The scholars

who participated in the study had combined for over 70 national refereed publications concerning the chairperson during the previous six years. One of the primary assumptions of the study was that these individual scholars, primarily college level faculty, knew something about the historical foundation of college formation and organizational development. Although the participants averaged 2.76 incidents or factors in the initial Delphi survey, they were collectively able to identify 29 statements related to the development of the chair position. Additionally, these scholars rated their own level of knowledge of the history of the chair position as primarily moderate to high, indicating that some perhaps recognized deficiencies in their own personal knowledge.

Finally, the factors identified in the study were primarily inclusive of external forces, and neglected such internal considerations as students and faculty. Study participants identified 29 factors and incidents related to what they perceived impacted the chair development of the position, yet no items dealt specifically with students, faculty, or student or faculty centered issues. The only items somewhat related to these internal constituencies dealt with the accessibility of college for students, and the availability of qualified individuals to lead academic programs. Both of these findings seemed to indicated that the current trend, which places greater emphasis on human capital and customer service, was negligible during the period of study. Although the federal movement of Progressivism promoted the concepts of democracy among the general populace, this belief system and its results appeared to have not been reflected in the organizational development of higher education institutions.

Additionally, the Progressive movement was reflected in the responses related to business and industry operations, via managerial behaviors and practices.

These conclusions and findings provide a foundation for faculty and administrators to pay closer attention to the issues, which influence institutional behavior. These influences have the potential to alter the behavior and responsibility of the chair position, and as such, faculty may find themselves in a position of losing their primary advocate. Administrators may find themselves in a position of reliance on chairpersons, only to find changes in responsibilities, which negatively impact or prohibit the flow of policy from senior administration to faculty. This heightened attention may take the form of participation in legislative watch groups, greater exposure to trends and issues in higher education, and participation in faculty and professional development programs, which view the faculty, and administrative role in the larger context of society.

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Table 1.

Scholars Active in Publication Concerning the Chair Position

Author/Scholar	Publications by Year
J. Bennett	1990a; 1990b; 1989; 1988; 1983a; 1983b; 1982.
R. Boice	1992; 1990a; 1990b; 1986.
A. Booth	1982; 1978; 1969.
J. Carroll	1994; 1992a; 1992b; 1991.
J. Creswell	1993; 1992; 1991; 1990.
K. Eble	1986; 1990a; 1990b.
D. Fugili	1990; 1987; 1985.
W. Gmelch	1994a; 1994b; 1993a; 1993b; 1992a; 1992b.
A. Lucas	1994; 1990; 1989.
M. Miller	1995a; 1995b; 1994; 1993a; 1993b; 1992.
J. Murray	1995; 1994; 1992.
A. Seagren	1994; 1993; 1990.
R. Seedorf	1993; 1992; 1991.
A. Tucker	1991; 1984; 1980.
D. Wheeler	1994; 1993; 1992; 1990; 1987.

(Note: Only the first six citations reported; some authors had more than six.)

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistics on Critical Incidents and Factors Impacting the Chair Position

Incident/Factor	Mean	Mode	SD	Range
Federal legislation in vocational education which forced greater compartmentalization of responsibilities.	4.92	5.00	.2774	1.00
Increased attention to fund raising and emphasis on private endowments.	4.77	5.00	.4385	1.00
Movement toward specialization of responsibilities by private businesses run by major donors.	4.62	5.00	.6504	2.00
Growth of administration influence and decision making power.	4.62	5.00	.5064	1.00
Work of business leaders who served on boards of directors requiring greater accountability (responsiveness) from the institution.	4.62	5.00	.5064	1.00
Increase in qualified individuals to lead academic programs.	4.38	5.00	.8697	3.00
Span of control requirements and concern for growth and continuance of traditional programs.	4.38	4.00	.6504	2.00
Increase in alumni control over the university.	4.31	4.00	.6304	2.00
Populist movement with emphasis on practical application of knowledge.	4.23	4.00	.7250	2.00
Movement away from theology and medicine as principle curriculum.	4.23	4.00	.5991	2.00

Table 2, continued

Descriptive Statistics on Critical Incidents and Factors Impacting the Chair Position

Incident/Factor	Mean	Mode	SD	Range
Second Morrill Legislation results which offered greater opportunity to the middle class in attending higher education.	4.15	4.00	.3755	1.00
Polarization and separateness of academic and administration fostered by emphasis on research and funding sources.	4.15	4.00	.3755	1.00
Enhanced curricula resulting from an increased academic freedom at the college/university level.	4.08	4.00	.6405	2.00
Increase in the knowledge base, leading to greater specialization.	4.08	4.00	.6405	2.00
Diversity and specialization of academic programs.	4.00	4.00	.4082	2.00
National involvement in vocational education through legislation, which impacted how institutions were organized.	4.00	4.00	.5774	2.00
Industrial revolution resulted in a greater diversity of occupations.	4.00	4.00	.4082	2.00
Advocation of greater flexibility in the college curriculum as related to student choice.	3.92	4.00	.7596	3.00
Federal movements to create a system of research and development rooted in higher education institutions.	3.85	4.00	.8987	3.00

Table 2, continued

Descriptive Statistics on Critical Incidents and Factors Impacting the Chair Position

Incident/Factor	Mean	Mode	SD	Range
Change in philosophy for institutions to be more accessible to the general public.	3.69	3.00	.7511	2.00
Customer service and management work of Alfred Sloan at GM in 1920s, which encouraged institutions to respond to marketing and management issues.	3.62	3.00	.9608	3.00
Teddy Roosevelt's use of the federal government to encourage business and industry growth.	3.54	3.00	.7763	2.00
Growth of megauniversities which required decentralization of the span of influence and management.	3.46	3.00	.7763	2.00
Growth in the number of undergraduate and graduate students.	3.23	3.00	.7250	3.00
National economic attention to private industry.	3.23	3.00	.9268	4.00
World War I and its need for "discovery."	3.15	3.00	.9871	3.00
Increased postsecondary attendance at educational institutions.	3.15	3.00	.8006	3.00
Expansion of cities.	3.08	3.00	.9541	4.00
Declining "elitism" of higher Educations access.	3.00	3.00	1.225	4.00